

## Editorial

# Sheriff sounds more like a leader now

Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca mentioned two personal goals this week: Winning re-election next year and living to 100. In recent months the latter had seemed more likely than the former.

The dedicated runner's physical fitness wasn't in doubt, but his fitness for office was. After revelations about the unwarranted use of violence by sheriff's deputies, Baca initially passed the blame to subordinates. A citizen's commission probing jail violence cited a "failure of leadership."

By last fall, the question had become whether Baca, 70, should resign before scandal or voters forced him out.

But the Lee Baca who visited the Los Angeles News Group editorial board this week, to outline responses to the problems in the Sheriff's Department, appeared as fully committed and as creative as ever in his approach to his huge job. It is still not clear that Baca deserves a fifth term, any more than it was clear before that he doesn't. But it is clear that Baca will not be easily brushed aside in 2014.

The question now is whether Baca's wide-ranging responses to the scandals makes up for his inability to prevent them.

Since the American Civil Liberties Union hit Baca in September with a report alleging brutal treatment of jail inmates by deputies, the sheriff said he has fired about 10 deputies and guards and has 10 more under investigation for failing to meet the agency's code of conduct. That's a good, tough response.

More-impressive responses are Baca's admissions that much of the ACLU's criticism is cor-

rect, and his actions to get to the systemic roots of issues instead of merely blaming underlings.

One was Baca's move to "finesse" Undersheriff Paul Tanaka into announcing his retirement — and then to essentially eliminate the position. Baca thinks this removes a barrier to communication between him and assistant sheriffs.

The insistence on using the word "finesse" to describe his ouster of Tanaka is classic Baca. The man who speaks proudly of being "accused of being a social worker" embraces soft approaches to law enforcement — one reason deputies' skull-cracking is so damaging to his image. He says he understands inmates' misbehavior because they "are all depressed, they have anxiety," and he understands over-reactions by deputies because "we're in a fear business."

A champion of so-called education-based incarceration, Baca has expanded life-skills classes to include 7,000 inmates, up from 2,000 in 2011.

He said not a single enrollee has since been involved in an incident requiring a deputy's intervention.

Results of such initiatives must be tracked as voters weigh Baca's future.

Baca's standing with other public officials matters, too, as he tries to talk county supervisors into replacing the aged Men's Central Jail.

It was a good sign that Terri McDonald, a state prisons official, signed on this week as Baca's new assistant sheriff in charge of jails.

A10  
**OPINION**

**A citizen's**

# Inmates complain about food

A report criticizes probation camps, but officials say youths dislike healthy meals.

BY JASON SONG

Youths at some Los Angeles County probation camps say that they are not getting enough to eat and are served unhealthy food, including a Sunday stew made of leftovers that some-

times contains "slippery and shiny" meat and "pink and undercooked" chicken, according to recent report.

The document is a result of a visit earlier this month by two citizens serving on the commission that advises the Probation Department about operations at the Challenger camps near Lancaster. "There was universal agreement by all who were queried on the site visit that the food was terrible," the report said.

Don Meyer, an assistant chief probation officer, said

he had not seen the document and had not looked at camp food recently. But Meyer said it was hard to believe that youths were served leftovers.

"We have a full-time nutritionist that puts the menus together so they get wholesome food," he said.

Meyer said probation officials are studying whether they could make meals more presentable but also noted that many teenagers don't like to eat healthy food. One employee told the monitors

[See Food, AA5]

## Youths dislike county probation camp food

[Food, from AA1]

that probationers only wanted hot dogs and hamburgers and rarely ate vegetables.

"They are pretty normal adolescents in that respect," Meyer said.

The report comes as county supervisors are set to consider renewing the food service contract for most of the camps. The board is scheduled to vote on the issue in two weeks.

The report is based on the commissioners' conversations with juvenile delinquents and probation employees at the six Challenger camps, which are named for the astronauts who died in the 1986 space shuttle disaster and house about 200 youths.

The report noted that youths seemed to like the lunch of breaded chicken, fried potatoes, carrot salad and Boston baked beans that was served the day they visited.

Still, the report's findings are similar to earlier county studies. Three years ago, evaluations found that nearly all of the department's juvenile facilities failed to provide adequate meals to minors who had special dietary needs, failed to meet minimum state and federal nutritional guidelines, and that fat made up more than 30% of weekly calories.

Conditions have improved since then, officials say. A similar report last year found that a majority of the problems had been corrected, although most camps still did not base their menus on federal and state nutritional guidelines, according to evaluations.

But one employee told the commissioners earlier this month that the fare was "the worst it has ever been," and several juveniles reported losing as much as 20 pounds even though they were taking psychotropic drugs that often lead to weight gain.

Probation officials said they weighed 10 juveniles who had spoken with the commissioners and that nine of them had gained weight since entering the camp. The other youth is 5 feet 7 and weighed about 235 pounds when he entered the camp and has since lost about 20 pounds, Meyer said.

County supervisors have delayed renewing a contract with the company that provides food services to the camps several times over concerns about the quality of the meals, and Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas said he would like to reopen the bidding process.

"Competition is a cure for a lot of problems," he said.

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LA Times

# BACA TOLD AIDE TO RETIRE

LATIMES.COM

Mon 3-25-13

Los Angeles

Mon 3-25-13

The sheriff publicly defended Paul Tanaka amid the jail scandal. In private, he wanted him out, sources say.

BY ROBERT FATURECHI  
AND JACK LEONARD

Despite publicly defending his second-in-command for months amid an abuse scandal in the Los Angeles County jail system, Sheriff Lee Baca pressured Under-sheriff Paul Tanaka into stepping down, several sources said.

The Sheriff's Department has repeatedly portrayed Tanaka's decision to retire earlier this month as a move Tanaka initiated. But sources said Baca met with Tanaka and told him he should retire. The conversation, they said, stunned his once-trusted confidant.

One source close to Tanaka said the undersheriff believes Baca views him as a political liability and is trying to use him as a scapegoat for the jail's problems as the sheriff seeks reelection to a fifth term. That same source, who has spoken with Tanaka, said Tanaka has not ruled out running for sheriff himself, challenging his boss in the 2014 election.

Jim McDonnell, the police chief of Long Beach, is already considering a run against Baca in 2014, and Tanaka's entry into the race would pose the most serious electoral challenge the sheriff has faced in his 14 years of leading the agency.

Sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore said Sunday that both Baca and Tanaka insist that the undersheriff's retirement was voluntary and had nothing to do with Baca's reelection campaign. Whitmore said he spoke to both men Friday afternoon and that they said Tanaka independently de-



FRANCINE ORR/Los Angeles Times

**L.A. COUNTY** Undersheriff Paul Tanaka testifies last July about allegations of mismanagement in the county jail system. His retirement takes effect Aug. 1.

## Aide stunned, sources say

**[Tanaka, from A1]** cided to step down. The source close to Tanaka said Tanaka never told Whitmore that on Friday.

Tanaka's departure comes as Baca tries to lead a reform effort at the troubled department, which is the focus of an FBI investigation into allegations of jailers beating inmates and visitors. Baca last week introduced a new head of the jail system, a Sheriff's Department outsider with a reputation for reform.

This month's announcement that Tanaka was retiring was met with praise from some department critics, who said they hoped it signaled a serious effort to fix the agency. Baca and Tanaka were harshly criticized in a blue-ribbon report last year that blamed their leadership for many of the woes facing the Sheriff's Department. The Times reported last year that a federal grand jury has asked about Tanaka as part of its investigation.

Tanaka has long been a controversial figure in the department. Along with his affiliation with a deputy clique, current and former sheriff's officials have accused him of creating a climate in which aggression was prized, loyalty was placed above merit and dis-

cipline discouraged Tanaka has denied those accusations, saying they are politically motivated.

Publicly, the sheriff has described Tanaka as an invaluable administrator, trained as a certified public accountant who has helped steer the agency's budget through difficult financial times. Baca dismissed critics who complained that his top aide had undermined jail supervisors and fostered a corrosive culture in the jail.

Privately, however, Baca has recently been less supportive of Tanaka, according to the sources, who all requested anonymity out of concern of reprisals.

Before Tanaka's March 6 announcement that he would be leaving the department after 31 years, he had had two private meetings with Baca. In the first, sources said, the sheriff told Tanaka it was time for him to step down. Tanaka initially did not accept the suggestion, sources said. A source close to Tanaka said that during the second meeting, Tanaka agreed to do so but felt he had no choice.

One high-ranking sheriff's official said that Baca's displeasure with Tanaka mounted after The Times reported that Tanaka had previously helped funnel hundreds of sheriff's ballis-

tics vests to Cambodia through Gardena. At the time the vests were sold, Tanaka served as a Gardena councilman. Today, he is mayor of the city. The official said Baca was angry about the latest in a long string of controversies involving his second-in-command. "There was a sense that 'The sheriff has got to do something now,'" the official said.

A source close to Tanaka confirmed Baca expressed anger that Tanaka did not tell the sheriff about the sales. Tanaka has publicly said he played a minimal role in those transactions.

Tanaka, the source said, has told others he feels betrayed by Baca, particularly because he says Baca had told him privately for months that he was doing a good job.

On the day he announced he was retiring, Tanaka told the Daily Breeze he wasn't leaving because of the jail scandal or the unusual sale of ballistic vests to Cambodia, saying instead he needed a break after "working two jobs since I was 15." He added that he wanted to spend more time with his family. His retirement takes effect Aug. 1.

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# DAILY BREEZE

Sunday, March 24, 2013 \$1.25 FACEBOOK.COM/DAILYBREEZE TWITTER.COM/DAILYBREEZENews

## SPECIAL REPORT: A BROKEN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM



Sarah Reingewirtz — Staff Photographer

Single mom and nurse Cynthia Bradbury plays with her son Xander, 2, as she gets him ready for bed in their Huntington Beach home.

# Failing our kids

By Ben Baeder >> [news.tribune@sgvn.com](mailto:news.tribune@sgvn.com) >> @ReporterBen on Twitter

Eight out of every 100 children in Los Angeles County are black. And 29 out of every 100 children in foster care are black. That jump in proportion, which is common statewide, is one of the most controversial discussions in the child welfare community.

And when black children go into foster care, they get stuck there 50 percent longer than children of other races.

During the 2000s, social work experts suspected that institutional bias and racism by social workers caused the high proportion of black children in foster care.

Leaders in the social work community made that assumption based on decades-old data that showed that black children were abused and maltreated at the same rate as children of other ethnic classifications.

County child protection agencies across the United States concentrated on training their workers to be racially sensitive.

But new studies show that black children die and are mistreated by family members more often than other kids. And instead of rooting out alleged racism, the county now faces a more nuanced and difficult task — getting into black neighborhoods and finding out how to best help children who are mis-



SARAH REINGEWIRTZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Xander Bradbury is one of Cynthia Bradbury's three foster children.

### HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

Interested in becoming a foster parent for Los Angeles County? Information is available by calling the Los Angeles County Resource Parent Recruitment line at 888-811-1121.

### STATISTICS

Deaths per 100,000 children in foster care by region during 2009:

**Antelope Valley:** 19.7

**San Fernando Valley:** 13.9

**San Gabriel Valley:** 14.4

**Metropolitan Los Angeles:** 17

**Westside L.A.:** 10.9

**South L.A.:** 23.3

**Eastern L.A. County:** 14.8

**South Bay:** 15.2

Source: Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse

Sun 3-24-03 11:05 AM

# A safer foster system

L.A. County hasn't adopted key reforms that could help protect young children most at risk.

By Andrew Bridge

**J**UST BEFORE MY 7th birthday, a police car rolled up alongside me as I was running an early morning errand for my mother. An officer leaned out the window and asked if my name was Andy. He then asked me to get into the car, and we drove the short distance back to the squalid motel where my mother and I were staying. Leaving me in the car, the officer jumped out to join a woman who was arguing on the sidewalk with my screaming mother.

By then, my mother and I had been evicted from a string of apartments. We'd gone on to live with friends, then with strangers before finally getting a room in the motel. At night, we ventured outside, eating from dumpsters and trying to hide from a pack of men that my mother's schizophrenic delusions told her were hunting us.

I hopped from the car and tried to intervene, but I was pulled from my mother's arms, shoved into the woman's car and taken to MacLaren Hall — Los Angeles County's infamous, now closed facility for children in foster care.

I spent the 11 remaining years of my childhood in the foster care system, moving from MacLaren to a loveless foster home. Good at school, I graduated from high school, attended college on a scholarship, then law school.

As hard as it would have been for me to see it that way when I was a ward of the county, I was one of the lucky few.

Children who wind up in foster care are among the most vulnerable people in society. And the system just keeps failing them. This was driven home powerfully once again recently in a confidential report commissioned by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Detailing 16 deaths of children in the system, the report documented how children were placed in homes known to be dangerous and how county workers were sometimes incompetent or failed to follow investigative procedures. It detailed numerous "systemic recurring issues" that were "in need of immediate remedial attention."

The report described failures at the system's front end, the point at which allegations of abuse or neglect are received, and at the backend, the point at which children are removed from their parents or guardians and placed under county care. In addition to the children who died — often very young — the report documented how many other children

in foster care were in unsafe or unsuitable settings and denied opportunities to thrive.

If these latest revelations follow the usual course, advocates will demand another round of leadership changes. But that would be the wrong approach. In the last 15 years, the Department of Children and Family Services has had eight directors. It's hard to build continuity with that sort of turnover. It would also be a mistake to suddenly descend on at-risk families, plucking children from their homes and swelling the number of children in county care.

So what should be done? The report offers a number of recommendations, but it neglects two crucial ones.

Of the deaths looked at in the report, 11 of 16 involved children 5 years old or younger. More than a third of all allegations of abuse or neglect in the county involve children in this age group, and nearly 50% of all children who enter county foster care are 5 or younger. While noting overall failures to investigate and evaluate risks, the report pays scant attention to these facts.

Very young children are particularly vulnerable. They have the fewest contacts outside of a home. They are less likely to be in school. They can be easily moved, even hidden, from investigators. They have far less ability to articulate their circumstances to others. While some procedures are in place for evaluating young children's cases, the county ought to determine why safeguards failed and then heighten them for this age group.

One step toward addressing these problems would be for the county to move away from reliance on a single emergency response worker's assessment and require multiple people to evaluate a child's circumstances. The idea is something like peer reviews in medicine, which allow doctors to assess their approaches to a patient's illness. Other foster care systems, such as in New York and Illinois, have adopted this reform successfully. Los Angeles has been tragically slow.

A second failing of the report involves service providers. It makes some important recom-

mendations, including more effective identification, coordination and vetting of those who take in foster children. But most of its focus is on larger providers who run group homes or otherwise care for multiple children. Scant mention is made of the kind of providers most children end up with: unrelated foster parents or family members who agree to take them in. As of January, 76% of children under county care were living with unrelated foster parents (32%) or with family relatives (44%). Individual providers are responsible for feeding and clothing a child, getting a child to the doctor and school, and navigating a complex bureaucracy to ensure that a child's needs are met.

Los Angeles County needs to take immediate steps to monitor and improve the care that children receive in individual homes. National census data indicate that households caring for foster children face huge challenges. They are larger than households without foster children, have lower levels of education and have lower incomes. They are more likely to receive public assistance. It is difficult to imagine how to improve foster care without intensely considering the situations of those who provide the bulk of it.

The county also needs to develop strategies for identifying families with the parenting qualities needed and for eliminating those who don't have them. If a particular foster home repeatedly asks that children in its care be relocated, or if children in a particular home are more likely to fail at school or aren't taken to doctors when they need to be, then the county should no longer place children in those homes. This seems like basic logic; yet according to the report, the county lacks the means to track outcomes from individual homes.

I know how lucky I was. I was taken into the system because I needed to be, and even if my situation was far from perfect, I was at least safe and physically provided for. But those basic elements of care shouldn't have to depend on luck.

ANDREW BRIDGE is executive director of the Child Welfare Initiative in Los Angeles.

Wes BAUSMITH  
Los Angeles Times

CITY	DESCRIPTION OF ASSET DISPOSITION	MEETING	VALUE	VOTES	NOTES
FIFTH DISTRICT	Phase 2 Lincoln Crossing: • Lincoln Ave, Vacant, APN: 5827-011-900 • 2231 Lincoln Ave., Vacant lot w/ billboard. Mixed funding.		Original Purchase Price: \$8,675 (2006) \$1,151,814 (2008)		

ASSETS DISPOSITION - DRAFT

# Foster

FROM PAGE 1

"There was no smoking gun," said Armand Montiel, who started as a frontline social worker and now is in charge of public affairs for the county's Department of Children and Family Services.

"It almost would have been easier to solve this if racism or bias were the case," he said. "We could target that with training or by weeding out workers who were biased. But that's not the case. It's much more complex."

The county in the past few years has ramped up its efforts to take a serious look at why so many black children end up in foster care.

But if racism is a factor, then the racism would come from a staff made up mostly of ethnic minorities.

The number of black children in foster care is almost identical to the percentage of black social workers.

Of the 3,179 county social workers who make up the county's front-line staff, 907 are black. The largest number of social workers, 1,390, are Hispanic. About 590 are white. Some 280 are Asian or Filipino. And 10 are American Indian.

## A grim picture

By almost every measure, black children in Los Angeles County, and California as a whole, are at far higher risk than other children.

They are more likely to die than other children, and on average, they have more identifiable risk factors than children of other ethnic groups, according to recent data from researchers and county reports.

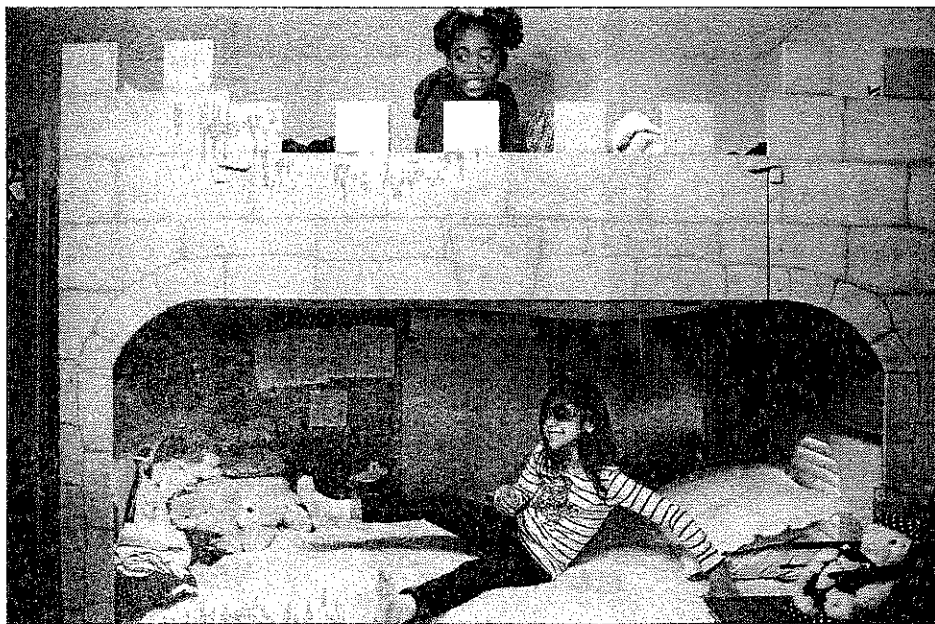
Of the 350 to 400 of all children who die of suspected abuse or neglect in Los Angeles County each year, 20-25 percent are black, according to the Los Angeles County civil grand jury report released last June. That's far higher than their 8 percent share of the child population.

Very few of those deaths take place while children are placed in foster homes, according to county statistics. In fact, 90 percent of the deaths of children who have



SARAI

Single mom and nurse Cynthia Bradbury of Huntington Beach spends a moment with her 8-year-old daughters Lilyana and



SARAH REINGEWIRTZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Eight-year-old sisters Olivia and Lilyana Bradbury play in their room at their Huntington Beach home. Three of Cynthia Bradbury's children are foster children.

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## Worry about kids first

Foster parents say race is too important in social work and that social worker should start worrying about children more than race.

Foster parent Cynthia Bradbury said a Los Angeles County social worker last year overtly talked about race when it came to Bradbury's foster son, Xander, 2, who is black. It was clear the worker did not want her to adopt Xander, she said.

Xander has a congenital heart defect that will kill him without a heart transplant.

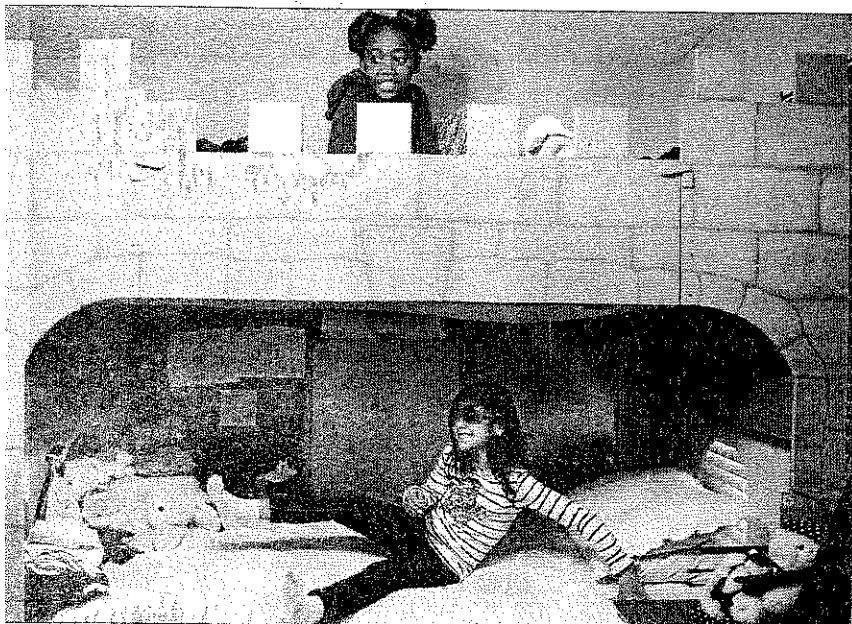
Bradbury is a registered nurse, and she's white.

"She said he needed to be with a black family," Bradbury said of the social worker, who was black. "She asked: 'What are you going to do when you have an African American teenager standing in front of you?' And I said would do the same thing I did with my own teenage son."



SARAH REINGEWIRTZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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"She said he needed to be with a black family," Bradbury said of the social worker, who was black. "She asked: 'What are you going to do when you have an African-American teenager standing in front of you?' And I said I would do the same thing I did with my own teenage son."

▪ The office that serves South Los Angeles is seven to 10 miles away from the neighborhood it serves and has no free parking.

▪ The social workers that serve black communities tend to transfer to other offices after about a year, handing off all their cases to transitional workers.

▪ Case loads are highest in the neighborhoods that need the most service.

▪ Services offered to help families reunify with their children are applied unevenly, if at all.

The report said the department needs to put an office in South Los Angeles and to evaluate whether social workers are simply checking off lists or actually trying to help parents change enough to get their children back. It asked the county to find a way to keep social workers in the same offices so families have continuity of service.

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cording to county statistics. In fact, 90 percent of the deaths of children who have had contact with the county's Department of Children and Family Services die when they are living with their birth families, according to the grand jury report.

A look at neighborhood data shows that one Los Angeles County area stands out for its high child mortality rate — South Los Angeles, where the death rate in 2009 for children was 23.3 per 100,000 children, according to the most recent statistics available from the Los Angeles Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect.

Most of the rest of the county had a rate that averages about 15 deaths per 100,000. On a national scale, the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect released in 2011 found that children in black families are mistreated at a rate about 1.7 times the national average.

"In nearly all cases, the rates of maltreatment for black children were significantly higher than those for white and Hispanic children," the study found.

With all those risks at home, it's no wonder that so many black children end up in foster care, experts say. Those statistics match research findings that show a strong correlation between poverty and child maltreatment.

If there's any hope in making a dent in the number of black children in foster care, it can be found in new research that shows exactly what types of families are most at risk for having a child in need of protection, experts say.

Starting in 2011, USC researcher Emily Putnam-Hornstein and her mentor, Barbara Needell, took a novel approach to characterizing the situations that end up with a child getting reported for maltreatment in California.

They took birth records and compared them with reports from the state's child protection agencies.

They came to a telling conclusion: Based on risk factors, they could almost predict which babies would be reported to child protective services before they turned 5.

Things such as low birth weight, low income, a young mother, low education, and

of the child being reported to a child protection agency.

Putnam-Hornstein found that black babies were twice as likely to have a low birth weight than the rest of the children born during the study period. One out of five black children had no father listed on the birth certificate, a ratio almost four times higher than white children.

Further studies found that California residents probably weren't singling out black families and reporting them to child protective services. In fact, when controlling for poverty, black children were less likely to be reported for child maltreatment than children of other races.

Putnam-Hornstein found that building racial sensitivity among social workers probably wouldn't cause a serious reduction in the number of black children in foster care.

"Our findings suggest that although working to address... biases is in no way inappropriate, in isolation, these efforts are unlikely to achieve the desired effects," she said.

Other studies show that black families use corporal punishment about 10 percent more often than parents from other ethnic groups.

Former foster child Marcellia Goodrich said she and other black foster youth were disciplined very severely in their birth homes. She was raised in South Los Angeles and now lives in Long Beach. She spent much of her childhood in foster care.

"I've been hit with a

switch, a telephone, an extension cord," said Goodrich, 22.

Goodrich's childhood also had another risk factor, the lack of a father. Her father left when she was a baby and is now in prison, she said.

National data show that about 70 percent of black children are born out of wedlock compared with a rate of about 40 percent for the general population. Black men are also 5.8 times more likely than white men to be in prison or jail, according to national justice statistics.

## Age-old problem

The leading voice for studying ways to reduce the proportion of black children in foster care is Dorothy Roberts, a University of Pennsylvania Law School professor who wrote the 2002 book "Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare."

She was one of a host of child-welfare experts who believed institutional racism was the leading cause of the high number of black children in foster care, an argument that has lost steam in the face of new data.

Roberts and her colleagues cited a Massachusetts Institute of Technology study of children ages 5-15 who were taken from their parents on marginal circumstances of neglect. The study shows that older children in marginal cases placed in foster care had poorer outcomes than children who are left home. In other words, foster care in some cases worsened

a child's circumstances.

Roberts and others have said counties should heed the results of those findings and do a better job of working with black families to keep children in their birth homes.

"They assume that taking a child away from his or her family is better than leaving the children home," she said. "That assumption is made the most often about black families."

Roberts says the issue is so complex that some in the social welfare world are tired of talking about it.

But Roberts maintains that the proportion of black children in foster care is important to discuss.

"When I started working on this subject, it had been how long, 20 or 30 years, since somebody had taken a serious look at this," she said. "My work was really a call for more research."

The issue should be of concern, she said. "If we saw these same numbers with white children, there's no way that society would find it acceptable," she said.

Other researchers say the past 10 years of efforts to target alleged racism were misguided and a waste of time. Harvard Law School professor Elizabeth Bartholet is generally considered the main critic of the "racism" argument.

"The bottom line is that there is absolutely no evidence of system bias," Bartholet said. "What we do have is overwhelming evidence that there are higher black maltreatment rates."

in front of you?" And I said would do the same thing I did with my own teenage son."

Throughout Xander's case the social worker brought up race, Bradbury said. Bradbury said she felt like she was being harassed.

In a separate foster care case years ago, an 8-month-old girl was removed from Bradbury's home by Orange County social workers because another couple wanted a white baby.

"I loved that little baby and I wanted to adopt her but they took her anyway," Bradbury said.

County officials said race-based decisions are not allowed and that they would look into Bradbury's case.

On the other hand, there aren't many white and Latino couples knocking down doors to adopt black children out of foster care, said Johnston Moore of Long Beach.

Moore and his wife, Teri, are about to adopt their seventh child from Los Angeles foster care system.

"When it's a cute little baby from Ethiopia, there are scores of families willing to adopt," Moore said. "But it's a traumatized 7-year-old boy from Compton, everybody runs the other way."

Issues of race and foster care need to be discussed, otherwise they will fester while policymakers focus on less important topics, Moore said.

"There are some elephants in the room, but a lot of people don't want to talk about them," he said.

## Critical report

One of the main reasons so many black children are in foster care is the length of time they stay in foster care.

County statistics show that black youths stay in foster care 50 percent longer than children of all other ethnic groups. In Los Angeles County, the average foster care case lasts about a year and a half. But for black children, it lasts more than two years.

This month, the county unveiled a 46-page study why black children linger in the system so long.

The report called into question all the practices the Department of Children and Family Services, including asking hard questions about the department's commitment in some of the county's poorest neighborhoods.



SARAH REINGEWIRTZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Cynthia Bradbury and her son Andrew, 17, carry her 2-year-old son Xander through her

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switch, a telephone, an extension cord," said Goodrich, 22. Goodrich's childhood also had another risk factor, the lack of a father. Her father left when she was a baby and is now in prison, she said. National data show that about 70 percent of black children are born out of wedlock compared with a rate of about 40 percent for the general population. Black men are also 5.8 times more likely than white men to be in prison or jail, according to national justice statistics.

### Age-old problem

The leading voice for studying ways to reduce the proportion of black children in foster care is Dorothy Roberts, a University of Pennsylvania Law School professor who wrote the 2002 book "Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare."

She was one of a host of child-welfare experts who believed institutional racism was the leading cause of the high number of black children in foster care, an argument that has lost steam in the face of new data.

Roberts and her colleagues cited a Massachusetts Institute of Technology study of children ages 5-15 who were taken from their parents on marginal circumstances of neglect. The study shows that older children in marginal cases placed in foster care had poorer outcomes than children who are left home. In other words, foster care in some cases worsened

a child's circumstances. Roberts and others have said counties should heed the results of those findings and do a better job of working with black families to keep children in their birth homes. "They assume that taking a child away from his or her family is better than leaving the children home," she said. "That assumption is made the most often about black families."

Roberts says the issue is so complex that some in the social welfare world are tired of talking about it.

But Roberts maintains that the proportion of black children in foster care is important to discuss.

"When I started working on this subject, it had been how long, 20 or 30 years, since somebody had taken a serious look at this," she said. "My work was really a call for more research."

The issue should be of concern, she said. "If we saw these same numbers with white children, there's no way that society would find it acceptable," she said.

Other researchers say the past 10 years of efforts to target alleged racism were misguided and a waste of time. Harvard Law School professor Elizabeth Bartholet is generally considered the main critic of the "racism" argument.

"The bottom line is that there is absolutely no evidence of system bias," Bartholet said. "What we do have is overwhelming evidence that there are higher black maltreatment rates."

in front of you. And I said I would do the same thing I did with my own teenage son."

Throughout Xander's case the social worker brought up race, Bradbury said. Bradbury said she felt like she was being harassed.

In a separate foster care case years ago, an 8-month-old girl was removed from Bradbury's home by Orange County social workers because another couple wanted a white baby.

"I loved that little baby, and I wanted to adopt her, but they took her anyway," Bradbury said.

County officials said race-based decisions are not allowed and that they would look into Bradbury's case.

On the other hand, there aren't many white and Latino couples knocking down doors to adopt black children out of foster care, said Johnston Moore of Long Beach.

Moore and his wife, Terri, are about to adopt their seventh child from Los Angeles' foster care system.

"When it's a cute little baby from Ethiopia, there are scores of families willing to adopt," Moore said. "But if it's a traumatized 7-year-old boy from Compton, everybody runs the other way."

Issues of race and foster care need to be discussed, otherwise they will fester while policymakers focus on less-important topics, Moore said.

"There are some elephants in the room, but a lot of people don't want to talk about them," he said.

### Critical report

One of the main reasons so many black children are in foster care is the length of time they stay in foster care.

County statistics show that black youths stay in foster care 50 percent longer than children of all other ethnic groups. In Los Angeles County, the average foster care case lasts about a year and a half. But for black children, it lasts more than two years.

This month, the county unveiled a 46-page study of why black children linger in the system so long.

The report called into question all the practices of the Department of Children and Family Services, including asking hard questions about the department's commitment in some of the county's poorest neighborhoods. Among other things, the

have continuity of service.

### Poverty at the root

Researcher Brett Drake of Washington University in St. Louis' school of social work said that poverty is the strongest factor correlated with foster care.

Blacks in the United States typically live in concentrated pockets of "crushing poverty" that whites generally don't experience, he said. When researchers control for poverty, the child maltreatment differences between white and black families disappear.

Black households earn three times less than their white counterparts, and a comparison of assets is even more disparate, Drake said. Race matters far less than economic status, he said.

Drake is skeptical of the movement to address the problem through racial-sensitivity classes. Racism may be a tiny problem, but it's not nearly as destructive as poverty, he said.

Counties should focus on trying to find out exactly why black families are faring poorly in poverty-stricken black areas. And the battle, he said, starts with trying to make sure that black children don't grow up in extreme poverty.

"Blaming it all on bias is really the coward's way out," he said.

### Continuing discussion

Toni Oliver, the vice president for the National Association of Black Social Workers, said big-city social welfare agencies across the country have got to take a serious look at why so many black children are going into foster care and staying in foster care so long.

Some states, such as Texas, have made strides to make systemic reforms across different levels of the government, she said.

Oliver hoped researchers and welfare executives would set aside their philosophical differences and try to find ways to assist black children and their families.

Children should not have to grow up in foster care, she said.

"We cannot accept things the way they are right now — we just can't," she said. "This has got to stay constructive. It's just that when you start talking about race, everybody



SARAH REINGEWIRTZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

a Bradbury and her son Andrew, 17, carry her 2-year-old son Xander through her